



What it takes
Emmanuel Macron's party, floated less than a year before the race for the President's office began, has no deep political doctrine
AFP/PATRICK KOVARIK

STATES OF MATTER

En marche to uncertainty

The French election was fought within a narrow spectrum of nationalist anxiety



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For embattled western liberals, it was like emerging into a new dawn of hope. On May 7, Emmanuel Macron, deftly deploying the image of an unsullied outsider, won the French presidential election by a decisive two to one advantage over his Right-wing opponent, Marine Le Pen of the National Front (NF). Key to Macron's success was the distance he managed to establish from the discredited political establishment, through the artifice of launching his own party hardly a year before the presidential race. With the rousing, but ultimately rather vacant title of En Marche! (or "Forward!"), the party revealed no deeper political doctrine, except an intent to efface older distinctions in a new synthesis.

With national assembly elections in June being the first test of the new politics, the former Socialist Prime Minister Manuel Valls, has already pronounced the demise of his party and vowed to line up behind the newly-elected President. A bloc of Right-wing politicians and voters too could presumably rally to Macron's flag by then.

Macron comes to the powerful French presidency with the briefest of résumés in public service: four years as minister for the economy under his deeply unpopular predecessor, François Hollande. His effort then to shed older political orthodoxies, was seen to undermine key premises of the compact which kept France's labour unions active and involved. Despite widespread scepticism within the ruling Socialist Party, the Macron reforms were pushed through parliament using a rarely invoked procedural manoeuvre.

Shortly afterwards, Macron announced his parting of ways with the Socialists, embracing an ideological neutrality and a posture of pragmatism that placed the "nation" at its core. The French party system has always been more fungible than elsewhere. Socialists and communists, with nominal identities that have remained stable over the years, are now in a state of electoral irrelevance. Parties that have survived have had to reinvent and rebrand themselves.

In the first round of the presidential elec-

tion this year, three of the top six performers chose to contest under newly-fashioned names that were exhortatory rather than ideological. Macron's En Marche! led the field with its urgent call to resume the historical forward march of the French nation. Then there was the Left-winger Jean-Luc Mélenchon under the banner of La France Insoumise, or "Unbowed France", who finished fourth in a tightly contested first round, where the first four candidates were clustered around the 20 per cent vote share mark. Mélenchon, also a former Socialist, broke to the Left, essentially charting his own course and winning the late and rather reluctant endorsement of mainstream communists.

The mainstream party of the Right, with the scandal-plagued François Fillon as its standard bearer, had rebranded itself the "Republicans" in 2015, and finished narrowly ahead of Mélenchon. Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, who swept up the Right-wing fragments that stayed away from the Republicans, fought under the banner of Debout la France, or "Arise France" and came in sixth.

In the deep political and economic malaise that prevails in France, ideology has been replaced by inchoate appeals to national loyalty, largely indistinguishable in formal terms across the political spectrum. This genuflection before an abstract ideal of French national glory pays unwitting homage to the xenophobia that has been the NF's unique appeal. The NF seeks to turn the perceived erosion of national glory on a vulnerable immigrant population and France's partners in the European project. Others seek routes towards national aggrandisement that preserve newly-acquired embellishments of civility and liberalism.

Those embellishments are clearly of less value when economic anxieties are becoming the main determinant of voting behaviour, and this shows in Le Pen's electoral performance. In a very crowded field in the 2002 presidential election, her father Jean Marie won

through to the second round by what was a statistical fluke. The top three candidates all had vote shares clustered around the 17 per cent mark, and Jean-Marie narrowly beat a popular Socialist candidate to qualify. His luck ran out by the second round: he barely managed to increase his vote share and was outvoted nearly five times by Jacques Chirac.

The daughter has done considerably better, increasing her vote share by a substantial 12 per cent between the first and second rounds. In the ideological flux and turmoil of France today, substantial numbers of voters are breaking for the far-Right. That could become a stampede if the Macron formula for restoration of French glory fails to gel.

Macron sees France's economic future tied to a reinvigoration of the faltering European project, an enterprise in which German endorsement is essential. Modesty is out of place here. High European Union officials are hinting at an autonomous course in world affairs,

stepping into the void caused by the regime of clownish ineptitude in the US and rescinding the privileges enjoyed by the British financial services industry in the continent.

Other plans that Macron brings to the table include a common budget for the Euro currency area and a mutualisation of debt that would enable the lesser economies to overcome sovereign debt issues by leveraging the creditworthiness of the more solid performers. Germany is sceptical but has to sustain a strong partnership with France to prevent the fragmentation of Europe. The road ahead is uncertain, but the European project will continue to flounder if it stays within the halfway house of monetary union devoid of fiscal coordination. "Fortress Europe" may well be the continental response to the gathering Brexit momentum across the channel and cries of "America first" across the ocean.

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